

## BACK TO COMMUNITY: LOCAL-TO-LOCAL

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**The whole of anything can never be told.**

Henry James, Notebooks.

### Introduction

This is a *gestalt* of the experiences with a community of five villages in Theni district of Tamil Nadu, India, gained over several years. The paper attempts, rather very briefly, at summarizing the perspectives and insights gained through years of collaboration and engagement with the Theni community within the provided format of 'Back to Community: Local-to-Local'. The intention is both simple and profound. It is simple because the ideas assembled here from experiences are as simple as the community of which we are concerned, in an effort to understand the way it works and the pathways to its future as I see it. It is profound because the community I am talking about is innately profound, intuitively complex even as its people are simple and ordinary: they are indeed a beautiful people (and that beauty, as the saying goes, is in the eye of the observer, that is, I see their beauty as no others do). But my words are inadequate to express that beauty; and I try my very best here.

### 'Creating Community' as a Never-Ending Process

**Only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.**

Emerson

Although human communities have emerged several thousand years ago, in India, as a response to sedentary occupations like agriculture, they have always been *in the making*. Communities appeared, grew, disappeared and appeared again. It has been a never-ending process ever since they began eons ago. With every passing ecological succession and every sequence of occupation, the communities began, grew, reformed and grew differently again. India, as an old civilization, has seen several cycles of growth of human communities. I believe that growing community is an everyday affair with us, in India, and, of course, any part of India.

Along the way, what was once an *egalitarian society*, that is, a society in which everyone was *equal*, no matter what occupations – teaching or advise, governance of the country or administration of peace and war, barter and trade, and services [(the Hindu Law-giver Manu's *Varnashrama dharma* (= the righteousness of the social classes to work and serve) became infinitely in-egalitarian (unequal)]. This inequality crept in stealthily and ever so slowly as when in rewarding the teacher and/or advisor the kings of those days, in the ancient past, gave away the land by a proclamation that '*take the land as far as your eyes could see*'. The teacher was much too pleased and prospered.

And, with land came material prosperity and with material prosperity came *power*. As they say, *power corrupts* and it indeed corrupted the ones who received land in rewards. In some cultures,

land is man and man is land. The Indian culture became a culture of land, power, greed and more land for more power. In the long process, the people became *unequal*. The egalitarian social division of labour of the law-giver Manu gave rise to an in-egalitarian society.

Castes led to social divisions, discrimination, untouchability and, worst of all, separation of '*living spaces*', one for the high castes and another for the low castes. Discriminatory social divisions, castes, resulted in '*cheris of the pariahs*' (these words are now derogatory and their use bring about resentment and legal action). Untouchability became the order of the day and the concepts of 'twice-born', upper or higher and lower castes (sudras and untouchables) came to prevail upon a society that became increasingly unequal, discriminatory, depriving and oppressing communities of people: poor, marginalized and deprived.

That this *injustice continues till this day*, in various forms and in variable levels of oppression, suppression and deprivation of human rights, is something a civilized individual cannot easily digest: but the fact is: *it exists, it is real and it not just discriminates but saps the sanity of a people who deserve better*, for their blood is as *red* as ours and their feelings is as *genuine* as ours.

In-egalitarianism has indeed ushered in agitation, protests, rallies, lobbies and violence so long (communal riots have once been the order of the day in India and it does not seem to relent as it raises its ugly heads every now and then, making most of us feel ashamed for what we are and what we have become despite reaching the heights of civilization) that there has been a process of *making* and *marring* of the communities: India has indeed been a melting pot of cultures and growing and creating communities.

Have we indeed made any progress in the direction of equality of Indian human kind? Is there a possibility that the communities of the future would be those of equality and justice? We have so many legislations, but nothing seems to work against the wrongs against the poor, marginalized and the deprived, because of their birth, caste and lived-in communities.

A saner person would quickly get to the question: what makes it necessary to keep a segment of people separated in '*reservations of discrimination*' where and when sanity and reason take the back seat?

This deprivation, discrimination, and in-egalitarian situation has led to large scale migration of the socially depressed classes of people to the towns and cities, looking for becoming *anonymous*, where they would hopefully find anonymity and '*would get lost in the crowd*'.

Migration to city has also made possible slums, a socially deplorable living condition, but offering the anonymity one needs and works towards changes in the compositions and in the everyday working of communities.

To cut the story short, this discrimination and deprivation and the injustices of the society has made possible a *continuous, often violent and militant pathway* for the deprived and the discriminated. With reformers (the likes of E.V.Ramasamy – Periyar – in Tamil Nadu spearheading a movement 'brahminism' and castes) and their hard and winning ways, the Indian society has relented and reformed that the untouchability has begun to disappear, ever so slowly, aided along the path with the government legislations and the changing attitudes of the people resulting from increased education and awareness of the injustice of all.

The result is: the people who were kept out of households because they were considered as untouchables have now become somewhat accepted and are allowed to enter high caste households *as far as the kitchen, but not the kitchen as yet*. Those who removed clothes to give their children to the them some years ago do not do so anymore but let the children find friendship and consolation from them more readily than before.

There have been *mending* and *amending* on the part of the high castes and the educated of the communities is in no doubt. And there is a lot to mend and amend on either side (the high and the low: should we not refrain from using these words, if our intention is making people equal amongst us?) of the community is without doubt a *hitch* in the works. So far, there have been positive (relenting on the part of the high castes, for example, and meeting the low castes half-way along the pathway towards mending) as well as negative (talking tough and being militant and even violent, on the part of the deprived, for example) stances and strategies towards normalizing (isn't there a better word, here?) the relationships. There is hope 'sanity' will prevail and harmonizing will take place sooner than later.

Lest the readers misunderstand the intent of the passages above, let me quickly add that the nature (the rainshadow, the winds and the sands), the hazards (the drift and the encroachment of sand on the productive agricultural land) and the hardships (low income, poverty and penury) all make their own little contributions to the changes and reformations in the Theni community, for community formation is both a natural and man-made process of change, ferment and refinement. Nature, for example, the inclement climatic elements and corresponding social / spatial responses, has a say in the making of communities as well.

## Community as a Complex System with a Fault Line

**In life, the issue is not control, but dynamic connectedness.**

Erich Jantsch 1980

Without doubt, the Indian communities, no matter what they are, where and when they are, are extremely complex. Attempts at describing the socio-ecological situations (socio-ecological system descriptions) were earnestly made and even triumphantly succeeded resulting only in rewriting the descriptions immediately after such exercises. The communities and relationships within and without are so innately complex that they often defy descriptions: either words are inadequate or there is a lack of language felicity.

However, several scenarios have emerged, each with colours and shades of their own and none fitting anyone community in particular, exactly and truly. There is often a fault line between the complex systems of communities (there is this feeling that there are '*communities within communities*', *coalescing* and *not coalescing* at all at once. The weave of social fabrics give the feeling that threads could be pulled and rolled, leaving a thin fault line of '*lost fabric*', which cannot be rewoven with any great success. The concept of community contextures becomes useful in explaining the interconnectedness or weaving together of parts (segments) within complex communities (The word *contexture* means the weaving together of parts into a whole). And the essence of *contexturalism* of the communities is the deliberate interconnecting or weaving of parts within complex communities (social systems) undergoing change.

The trouble with the divided, unequal Indian human communities such as the ones in Theni district is that they are seemingly permanently flawed by the *pulled and / or strained* threads that could not have closed or healed the flawed fault lines. The segments of population such as those of the *dalits* (*people who are oppressed and depressed by other segments*) and other lower and service classes (artisan classes, for example, barbers, washerfolks, carpenters, blacksmiths and goldsmiths) have left for 'greener pastures' of the towns and cities leaving the flaw of the social fabric unhealed or only slowly healing (the practice of traditional rewards for services rendered by this group of people have now stopped, for services are no longer rendered and sought after). The dalit segment is still nursing the wounds of the past and in the process gets agitated, in fits and starts, causing upsets in the process of community formation and or transformation.

What is more important in the given context is to stay connected, even if there are strained relationships and flawed social fabrics. Are the segments of society staying connected, with flows between them? Inasmuch as the society exists and works, with segments occasionally coming together for social celebrations, economic activities and political necessities, even in some strained manner, there is a *semblance* of interconnectedness manifest in such events as temple festivals, dominant-dependent relations such as between the landowners and landless labourers (temporary, permanent and exchange labour) and that, farther afield, in regard to seasonal labour movements across landscapes and cultures (in Theni district, landless labourers go over to Kerala, seasonally, to secure employment and income). Wherever they are, the people are ultimately connected to their roots, whether they like it or not.

People in the community are given respect and status, according to their contribution to society. There is sharing among the poor. The rich are ignored although even the rich are dependent on the poor for their livelihoods. They need labour, aren't they? Labour is expensive. They have to pay or perish. They of course complain. They do. But the poor know where they stand. They sometimes give in; sometimes do not. At other times, they make the rich feel that they are dependent; not the other way. The society is changing.

Speaking directly of the five village communities of Theni district, we may say this emphatically: There is at any given time a bargaining and struggle that take place within the village between the poor and the rich over resources. The poor are winning or are beginning to win. The poor have the innate urge / wish to end poverty. They have shown a potential for building abilities among themselves and using strategies that offer opportunities for support by external actors like the universities, even collaborating foreign ones.

Most important, the poor of the villages here offer experiences to the outsiders, lessons for development and sustainability, and share knowledge with them. There is a treasure house of indigenous or local knowledge, which offers insights into how they have managed, and are managing, their environments and resources and how they have developed coping mechanisms.

There are however two things that hamper them: the unresponsive government and its machinery; and the politicians and the corrupt village functionaries. The panchayat is in place but it is not doing much, as it is not effective.

## Many Forms of Community

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**The old is dying and the new has yet to be born.**

Antonio Gramsci from *Prison Notebooks*

Aristotle was the first to define the word "community" as a group established by humans having shared values. This initial definition has been refined and expanded through the years. There is recognition today that people can belong to a number of different "communities" simultaneously: for example, there may be "*communities of place; cultural communities; communities of memory*, in which people who may be strangers but they share "*a morally significant history*"; and "*psychological communities*" of face-to-face personal interaction governed by sentiments of trust, co-operation, and altruism" (Bell, 1993: 14).

Life in the Kambam Valley in Theni district was, and to a great degree still is, characterised by a mixture of indigenous, linguistic elements. (It gets better if we talk about them in the present, for a while). There are people who speak Kannada (*Gowder* community, equivalent of *Gowda* community in Karnataka) who have lived several generations here and the way they speak their language tells us that they have been here for a very long time. Sprinkled with a lot of Tamil words, the Kannada dialect of the Valley has become typically *Tamilian*. There are people who speak Telugu, again a Telugu so localised (*Tamilised*) that a native Telugu speaker from Andhra Pradesh would disown the folks here, without hesitation.

There are of course *Malayalis*, the speakers of *Malayalam* language, who have descended the hills on the eastern side, from the western slopes of Kerala. They have a very large, floating presence in the Valley. Many families have migrated from the adjacent State of Kerala and have made the Valley their home. They have prospered, too, in several businesses, especially in the hospitality industry (tea and coffee stalls, restaurants, and eating places). In these parts of the country, they say that '*you may find a Malayali even on the moon, offering hot 'chai' for the morning.*' They are a very mobile people, have found Gulf money / petro-dollars and Kerala is a veritable '*Paradise on Earth*', as this is the image created by the state tourism department.

The *Tamilians*, native to the Valley, are a minority, but everyone here speaks Tamil, the regional and link language. The people of the four southern states of the Indian Union live in such amity, the diversity of culture, language, and tradition is soothing to the minds disturbed by the occasional communal clashes reported in the south of India in more recent years, on the lines of religion and creed. We have in the fifteen or so years of our association with the Valley not heard of an incident that upset the communal amity. Instead, we have made friends with a secular Muslim man who renovated a Vaishnavite (Sri Perumal) Temple in 2003. Several of our local acquaintances and friends have lovable Muslim neighbours. The Hindus partake in Christian festivities and the Muslims in Hindu festivities and Christians in Hindu and Muslim festivities.

## Desire for Community is often Romantic and Not Real

I have often wondered, at the turn of every event that upset somebody or other in the villages, as to whether there is a community of common cause in these villages. Let us look at an event I was witness to, in Rasingapuram village.

When one of our interns and I were standing at the bus stand of Rasingapuram on a particular evening months ago, there was this fellow riding a two-wheeler and there was a pillion rider as well, distributing some pamphlets. The material on the pamphlet upset us, as it was propaganda material of a fundamentalist Hindu organization. Much of what was said was pure *poison* and we had the rider cornered for his unpatriotic ways. Nothing happened even as thousands of pamphlets were distributed and many of the recipients read them.

I am now quite convinced that our folks are simple, fun loving, and secular souls. I had occasions to discuss it several times over, but every time I was given the assurance that communal amity is here to stay. But there is this paradox, in the Valley villages. There are other incidents.

There are people who are frightened of other people. People are discriminated because they belong to certain castes and these people are poor and often dependent on the higher castes, for employment and livelihoods. Normal *human courtesies* are not shown to these people because they are not only materially dependent but also mentally dependent on the rich and the not-so-rich but land-owning.

A woman I met on one of my visits to Viswasapuram hamlet of Bodi Ammapatti along the cross-country walk told me quite candidly how people of higher castes threatened her people with dire consequences, if they went ahead and built houses on some *poramboke* (*government-owned*) lands. To avoid unnecessary clashes / violence, her people stayed away from the lands but would much prefer to build houses for themselves, if they could be helped in some way.

I was time and again to learn that she was not alone for there were other people who were frightened as well. They *avoided confrontation* because they had to go on living and they are dependent on those people who gave them work. When I cross-checked what was heard, some youths of Maniampatti confirmed that there were '*this fear among the scheduled castes, which is difficult to overcome, overnight. It would take years before this can be overcome and, that is, the scheduled castes are treated as human beings and equals. And signs of change are there for everyone to see.*'

On the other hand, the Valley is truly a symbol of secularism, but politics is spoiling the cultural fabric. Politicians seem to keep alive the caste differences, for when people are divided, they make *hay* and of course votes. '*Days are not far off when people would see the politicians through. And their little games, of course,*' is what Ramaiah, a retired teacher from Ammapatti would say.

It would be good to digress a little bit on politics. For politics was the undoing of most such communities, especially their *fabric of cohesiveness*. From what people told me, I must put the

blame squarely at the politicians' doorsteps. In the late sixties, there was a tumultuous change that occurred in the villages: for the first time, since independence, there was split in families along party lines. The elders owed allegiance to a national party and the young and not-so-young to another, regional party.

The elections saw father and son of the same family at loggerheads. For months on end, father and son went without talking to each other, because they spent their time in different party offices. Each spoke on political platforms against the other, rather vehemently. Elections were fought between the fathers and sons in most families. Results came and the regional party won. That marked the end of an era: *tradition was literally shoved in the villages*.

Politics entered the *panchayats* in the seventies. Some years later, local elections were also fought on party lines. Traditional inheritances of village public offices such as *pattamaniam* (village headman) and *karnam* (village accountant) disappeared. The *Panchayat* president was elected, and village accounts officers were appointed. In fact, more traditions were lost: people gave up *kudimaramathu* (public works and maintenance of canals, tanks, and ponds, which carried and stored water for their crops and homes, and for recharging groundwater), and temple festivals were discarded.

The artisans – the carpenter, the blacksmith, the goldsmith, the washermen, and the barber – left villages for small towns and cities beyond, because traditional awards and rewards for services rendered by them were withdrawn or stopped. With people increasingly going to nearest towns for a haircut, to nearest market for a hoe or crowbar, to the town jewellery shop for ornaments and jewels, the artisans moved out and set up shop in towns and thus fostered a market which has had larger thresholds and therefore larger demand and profits.

## **Celebrating Success**

Years ago, I came here looking for what people were doing and how they were managing their lands, their crops, and their lives. My aim then was to look at land management for rural development, in the Kambam Valley. I went around and interviewed people. I found that the people of the Valley were, as they are today, very enterprising.

They had developed a system of land management. They had organized Farmers' Associations almost in all of the villages, and federated them for the entire Valley. In some villages, as in Gudalur near the town of Kambam, they have *Paravukaval*, which is literally **area policing**, wherein literally some families are involved in protection of paddy crops and distribution of irrigation waters to the farmers.

In others, as in Chinnamanur, there are water managers, *Thanneer Maniams*, whose authority is never questioned in matters of water distribution from the canals to the paddy fields. The Valley villages have thus found their own, **indigenous solutions** for problems of land, water, and crop management.

Farmers' organizations here have a history of success and the Valley is known for **cooperation, coordination, and participatory land and irrigation management**. Yet it was here, some fifteen years ago, we found a few villages, which have had different experiences all because of the

natural events (winds and desertification) and also because it was human-induced (deforestation, cutting down of shelterbelts).

## **Overt Negotiation of Inclusion and Accountability**

The *milieus* and the *values* were so differently perceived by me that they deserved some serious investigation. And I did that in my investigation, of which I am reporting now years later. I am telling you, however, only part of the story of what I have looked into and what I have come to realize and appreciate.

In my understanding, in a society of such discrimination and neglect, land and water management has been such a great success because, in the meetings of the farmers' associations or water users' associations sanity prevailed and the farmers, men and women, together decided about the means of sharing the waters of the canals (surplus) and the tanks (deficits, always deficits for the tail enders) *equitably* (of course, in accordance with the water requirements of the variable sizes of farms). There was a deliberately overt negotiation of inclusion, and even accountability, for irrigation waters on the one hand and common property resources on the other.

I have now made extensive studies on irrigation water management, in the Kambam Valley (Theni district), the Sathanur Command Area (Thiruvannamalai district) and the Marudhanadhi basin (Dindigul district), that it is just not the case only with the Kambam Valley villages: it is true of the entire Tamil Nadu. The State has a *culture of water sharing* in agriculture, rendering internal justice to the farming population, especially small and marginal farmers of the tail ends. In some villages, say for example in Thanjavur district, irrigation begins from the tail end and goes through the middle and head reaches. The basis of sharing in some tank irrigated villages is '*first come, first served*' in that the first family that came originally to the village or the one that started the community building process gets water and the distribution goes in the order of the families that came to be settled in the village. In all of it, there is a sense of sharing and a sense of justice. Negotiations are thus a means of arriving at just decisions.

## **Inclusion, Exclusion and Responding to Crisis**

The well-being of a community as a whole is constitutive of each person's welfare...because each human being is constituted by relationships to others, and this pattern of relationships is important.

Daly and Cobb Jr., 1989: 138

Class, combined with patriarchy, religion and ethnicity structured various forms of inequality in village society. Religion ensured social and economic subordination of the scheduled castes. Various forms of exploitation therefore inter-connected in these villages to perpetuate systems of extraction of labour and capital from the poor.

But yet, the poorest could still negotiate, bargain and struggle at everyday and ideological levels, trying to get their rights to resource access honoured. True, room for the poor to maneuver was severely limited by the pattern of resource control in the villages, in particular their exclusion

from resource ownership of land and by debt and sometimes by the violence of the middle farmers discouraging them to protest.

When I was in the field I could see how strong the poor people were and how they braved poverty. My long years of association have shown me glimpses of their lives, however drab they might have been in the recent past. I was interested in the way the poor, particularly poor women, used natural and social resources to improve their quality of life. I was interested in the bargaining and the struggles that took place between the poor and the rich over the resources. And I found a potential for building on poor people's abilities, for the strategies used by them could offer opportunities for support by outsiders who wished to end poverty in the villages.

The people of the community told me many things but what struck me most were the '*feelings*' their words conveyed and the sadness I could feel deep down in their hearts when they spoke about the middle stream and the rich. Local power structures, they told me, were such that the rich diverted all resources from the poor but the poor manipulated those very structures for their own benefit and fought for resources and respect. Another insight I gained from my association was that poverty was very deep-rooted, and that nearly half the population in the five villages, and the entire population in some of the scheduled caste '*colonies*', suffered the pangs of hunger, day-in and day-out. And yet, they showed a determination in their ability to shape their societies by struggling with the elites over resources and ideology.

Speaking of ideology, the only ideology that the Ondiveerans (there are too many Ondiveerans, which literally means '*lone warriors*', in these villages; the name is actually that of a deity who resides in a foothill temple as well as in numerous under-the-tree shrines, near here), a family of four in Rasingapuram, knew of was that *the price of living was substantial* but that no matter how much they paid for living, it was well worth it. We could only see them in positive light despite woes and tears on women's faces.

And the rich of the villages encroached upon the common property resources. In Rasingapuram, the foreshore of an irrigation tank by the name Goundenkulam, irrigating several hundred hectares of land, was occupied by a village politician and he was given the *title* for that portion of land occupied by him. He could not be evicted some years ago, while the poor who occupied smaller portions similarly were evicted before desilting in 1998. In Thanjavur district, a community occupying 18 hamlets, aggregated into three *Nadus* (villages), gave up the centuries old system of water resources management carried on by a system of water user associations. The process was thus widespread, and not just confined to this area, or this milieu.

All said and done, the people are still depressed, and feel oppressed, because of their castes. They carry on however in the hope things will change. '*What can we do? It was, and is, this way for long and it is unlikely to go away*' is what a women from Pottipuram said. '*We are used to it; and it hurts but it does not infuriate us*' is what several men said when questioned closely about the situation. We could see and feel the way their thoughts run and their voices choke to think they are humans as much as others are; but why this injustice and why this social exclusion? That is why it is a paradox.

Caste and class divide people (exclusion), and religion rarely if ever. Nevertheless, the folks here are practical and resigned to indifference, in-egalitarianism, and inequality. In fact, unless reminded, they do not even think about the injustice. Humiliation is on the decline. Youth of the

villages do not discriminate as much as the elders / older people did or do. There is a change of attitude, if not of heart.

We need a dose of optimism and kick-start to proceed on the journey of life. If we found any philosophy of life amidst the people of our villages it was that a setback was but a stepping-stone for success, and indeed a green signal to 'go on'. Amidst so much dejection, there was so much positive thinking. That's exactly what we saw among the poor and the depressed. Challenges of life only made them stronger in the belief that they could and should win.

## Conclusions

Did not somebody knowledgeable (Siva Vaidhyanathan, 2002: An entire semester of knowledge in one day, Feature on 'Reading in the Fractured Landscape', SPAN, January/February: 25-26) say that '*you are part of the globe, snared in the World Wide Web of humanity, whether you acknowledge it or not.*' If that's so where are the people connected to the poor, concerned with the poor? Aren't the explanatory models of the world, a connected and concerned world, whatever they are, whoever did them, dangerously wrong? Are we to force someone to see the essential inter-connectedness of all human beings, not only here in these villages, but also out in the open, in India and abroad, and why in the whole world? One finds it harder to see caste differences, communal violence, and clashes or oppositions as given or necessary. The world around us is suddenly and painfully in flux. One of the issues in flux in these villages, why in the country, is there regionalism versus nationalism. People everywhere are not free as one would like to think they are. They are fettered. They need patriotism, patriotism of love, embedded in a sense of humanity, one that sees the villages as democratic, an articulated ideal and part of a large whole: the nation, one people. Why should somebody poor, the oppressed, make sacrifices while others perpetrate and draw innocent blood?

To continue further, from where we left off, dependency develops from unequal control over village resources and the subsequent debt by the poor is ultimately dependent on violence or threats of violence perpetrated by the wealthy or their supporters. The aim is to ensure the submission of the poor to their exploitation. Village violence has an unwritten history. No one from outside knows about it. The poor and the oppressed keep it to themselves. They don't want to talk about it. But then, the poor challenge the powerful where they could and this is the strength of the poor. They have the *right* on their side. The middle farmers don't; the rich don't. The poor do.

The rich and the middle class intimidate their poor neighbours. We were told by a group of middle farmer youth that they went to this temple festival, in a group, in Silamalai. They were there for fun and some gambol. They saw a group of young girls and women and '*we gave them a push*'. Hell broke loose. They told us that there were times when some drunken sorts knocked open the houses of poor women, when alone, and abused and beat them. These things happen all the time. The poor don't talk about it, but they do not suffer it either. They fight against it, in whatever means they could. They have the *right* on their side.

Life insists on small movements. Opportunities go hand in hand with problems. For many, the poor and rich alike, one numbingly unsatisfactory day opens into the next as the clouds rise above the mountains or as the increasing heat and humidity predict the monsoon. Even the words spoken on such days are gloomy. There are two worlds for most people: the loud reality of their everyday life-world and the silent visionary world heavy with anticipation, insight, and change.

There is an apparent troublesome incongruity of the Ondiveerans' two worlds. In the middle of May, the heat becomes intolerable. Outside, birds cry continuously, sharp, clear and obstinate. Sekhar and Karnan want to be free from sufferings. They want to spend time with birds, which know what moved and who moves their little worlds. Birds in the wood are the most satisfyingly intelligent escape from the harsh realities of the world of the poor.

When we are in the villages, family dramas unfold around us. Shock and disbelief turn into guilt and grief. Guilt and grief wend their way through thick webs of heavy, terrifying emotions. Sweet, precocious, affectionate children swarm around women, wherever they go. But the women do not seem to give them any special treatment. Once in a while, the children betray their parents. Angry and humiliated, the parents who sacrificed so many passions to family obligations, sever all connections. Some years later, grandchildren become agents of light and incremental change in their shadowed households. When somebody in the family disappears for a very long period, each person is forced to examine his or her role in the family. Then they understand each member and relative in their full score of strengths, vulnerabilities, superstitions, and tentative hopes. They forgive and forget. They welcome back the prodigal. They are as human as the humans can be.

And grandmothers tell gallant tales of heroism and cunning and wit and honour; of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (the two great epics of India) and of King Harischandra, who never uttered a lie in his life. At the end of their stories, they pick the children up and pinch their sharp little noses and chin and say endearing words of thousand enchantments.

Then they tell them *'you will grow up and become like the warriors of the epics; you will conquer every obstacle.'* And the grandchildren, in their innocence, believe them and sustain a clear-eyed hopefulness born of a generous spirit and seasoned common sense. In the course of time, their beliefs are shattered, and realities hit them hard. They survive. Instinct echoes in everyone's consciousness.

He did not have an education. He could not read. When he had to do something, he just followed common wisdom or it was *'best to do what we normally do'*. There was a teacher in the village. He spoke to us in sensible, just-folks tone and seemed the sort of voice all of them wished and could use but he didn't. He often panicked in life, but he made it. Now that he had his son, he felt secure and every need of his was taken care of, even while the son was away. There was this long distance relationship and he was soothed by it. He fell silent for a while, thinking about his *'good old days'*.

Suddenly he said in very clear tone and conviction that the sense of community could be restored, by detaching the familiar meanings of life from the relationship in which they were embodied, and re-establishing them independently of it. What he was saying was complicated enough for me to understand with any meaning at all. He looked at the question on my face and explained.

*'It's simple. Detach yourself from the life around you; this life of difference, discrimination, and pain of relationships. Go somewhere and start afresh. Or be here and do the same: start afresh. You see, this is what happens in the working out of grief. Somebody dies and the family bereaves. Someone leaves the community, like this family that disappeared one night. Then people grieve for them. They grieve their loss to the*

*community. If it ever comes back, then there is such reception. Community is back on its wheels. The sense comes back when shocks happen. '*

He had already lost me and I fell silent, not comprehending the profound wisdom from the old man. Then he said that one had to shock another to get the reaction one wanted. If one wanted all of them to unite and cooperate, give them a shock. It was like an old man's fantasies. What he said hit me hard. I understood that he wanted a calamity to shake the people into action: or grief for action. It was unacceptable. So I turned to others.

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